

## **Remembering Love: The Hard Work of Correcting Anti-Love Forces** **Russell Delman July 2020**

Once again, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. rocks my world with his energizing words:

*“**Power** without love is reckless and abusive, and love without **power** is sentimental and anemic. **Power** at its best is love implementing the demands of **justice**, and **justice**, at its best, is **power correcting everything** that stands against love.”* — Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

To see love as both the path and goal for social and racial justice elegantly marks this work as a spiritual path. To apply the same lens to our intra and interpersonal interactions is a powerful move. All who take this work seriously must stretch ourselves, and sometimes, contort ourselves, to see if we have cast anyone, including our own inner voices, out of our hearts.

Creating enemy images of “others”, no matter how unacceptable their behavior, makes us complicit in a divided world. Standing up powerfully and unreservedly, against injustice, while also caring for ALL of life is the great task at hand. **A simple definition of love is the impulse to take care of and stand up for life.** In this sense, anti-love and anti-life are synonymous.

### **Justice, Power, Love: The Unity of Inner Work and Social Action**

I apply MLK’s words, which he gave in the context of racial/social justice, directly to the inner work of relating to thoughts, feelings, and relationships. The outer and inner worlds are not separate, they form One World.

When do I forget love? Just yesterday, in a moment of defensiveness, I used the power of my words in a way that lacked care and understanding. In a strict sense, this is an abuse of power. Everyday, I witness moments of anti-love/anti-life forces at work, sometimes in my words, thoughts and even actions. When I view every interaction with the world, as expressions of love or anti-love, I am humbled.

Growing up, most of us imbibed cultural attitudes based in a “dominance-over” power structure. This structure requires an oppressor and a target. Without awareness and relearning, we apply this domineering attitude

toward self and others, sometimes as oppressor, other times as the target. Each time we do this, we add negativity and hatred into the world.

My first years of meditation brought me face to face with these kinds of “dominance over” inner voices. Sometimes the oppressive voices were dominant and other times there was a sense of hopeless resignation. Discerning between healthy effort and the destructive violent voices was unclear to me. In learning to befriend and neutralize these voices - through welcoming, warm-hearted awareness - I came to see they are not enemies. Rather, they are frightened mental habits trying to protect me from my perceived dangers. I saw that even my judgments of others were attempts at self-protection. Discovering that there are no enemies within was a transformative leap on my path.

In guiding many students over the years, I have witnessed just how destructive these inner voices can be and how transformative it is when self-caring and non-identification becomes natural. These old, internalized voices have great power until, like with the Wizard of OZ, one sees behind the curtain. Their power is based on a lack of clear awareness. Cultivating this caring attitude toward one’s own abusive or defeated voices can model a way of holding those misusing their power accountable, without turning them into inhuman enemies. As expressed above: “*Power without love is reckless and abusive (MLK)*.”

### **Moral Imagination**

**Moral imagination**, according to philosopher Mark Johnson, means “envisioning the full range of possibilities in a particular situation in order to solve an ethical challenge”.

Through Moshe Feldenkrais, I learned to view any situation from multiple perspectives. He would say that you really do not understand your position until you can argue effectively against it. This practice leads to St. Francis’ powerful incantation: “seek to understand before being understood”. As a man of action, Moshe did not suggest this view as an excuse for moral equivalence, denial of wrongness or inaction. In a bizarre and confusing conversation, this man, who witnessed pogroms in Ukraine and the holocaust in Germany, demonstrated this capacity by showing me how the world must have looked from Hitler’s perspective. As disturbing as his example was, it has stayed with me to this day.

Moral imagination requires us to enter uncomfortable places. For white people in the U.S. and elsewhere, to see our compliance with unfair systems of power and to stand against brutal police tactics is essential. For progressives to stop demonizing every police officer and stand for healing requires an inner expansion. Deepening the “us and them” divide does not lead to healing.

I notice constriction in my belly as I write these words, they can be easily misconstrued as absolving the perpetrator and minimizing the abuse. When I express this view, some people see it as intellectualizing and not really getting the level of danger that exists. I am not suggesting that those living in danger can make this move; this is the work of allies. This is not a popular view of many fighting for racial justice. As a beginner in these realms who makes many mistakes, I offer it humbly, feeling both a sense of clarity and uncertainty.

**My deepest fear is that “us and them” thinking creates a pendulum that just keeps swinging.** Right now, many people are horrified by the injustices that live in our world. Through videos and social media, we see power being abused everyday. At this moment, there is a potent, caring energy moving our collective imagination toward justice for all. I fear that the pendulum will soon swing back because we still are still creating “others”. I see this swing in the social movements throughout history. In recent times, the immense move from Obama to Trump or Gorbachev to Putin are obvious examples.

## **Love and Evil**

I wrestle with the question of evil. Although I don’t know, I choose to believe that there are no fundamentally evil beings, that all of us are redeemable. Still, there are evil actions and perhaps evil forces in the world. To stand up for love/life sometimes means to powerfully call out and reject these anti-life actions (“evil” is the opposite of life, it is “live” spelled backwards) yet still see the human being within the perpetrator. This demanding task is essential for real change. To expect an abused person to empathize with their oppressor is arrogant and unkind. This is the work of those of us who are beneficiaries of the social order. This very, very hard work is almost impossible to do without making many mistakes.

Using the power of love to lead to justice brings healing, not only for self but also for the trauma carried from past generations. How do families who were devastated by slavery, systemic racism, Nazism, violence against women or various genocides, free themselves and their perpetrators from hate? I really do not know. We need to learn this together.

### **Personal Power Guided by Love**

Knowing I have an international audience, I am not sure how to conclude. Some of my concerns are specific to the U.S., some are relevant to all of us. Dominance attitudes and the abuse of power, exist, with varying specifics, around the world. **Everyone reading this has the power to influence their world. It is important that we acknowledge this capacity. I suspect that owning and using that power, guided by love, is a universal answer to changing ourselves and the world.**

As a person living in the U.S., I want to address our specific situation:

**Lasting change requires an authentic shift of consciousness. In the U.S., when a critical mass of white people, acknowledge, in our collective conscience, that our country was built on the labors of black and brown bodies, as we murdered and stole land from the native populations, we will make a big step toward change.** Unless we reckon with the reality of this foundation, the building in which we live will forever be on shaky ground. Doing this without demonizing “others” is an essential piece of this shift of consciousness.

***“Love without power is sentimental and anemic” (MLK).***

Most people reading this do not see themselves as racist yet this is not the same as being anti-racist. In my view, many of us, myself included, are just now awakening to our complicity in the current power structure. This dangerous ignorance is most often unintentional. This is where educating each other is so key.

We each need to decide how to use our power. Although prayers are helpful, kind intentions are not enough. Action might include: educating oneself and others, looking directly at unintentional complicity, political participation, donating money, making economic choices that support equity, attending marches, calling out bias when witnessed, perhaps supporting a well-

conceived plan of reparations and finding other ways for one's voice to be heard. We each need to find our own right way.

**For me, before and beyond a political stance, these actions arise from a moral integrity and spiritual impulse.**

In closing, I repeat the eloquent, powerful words:

*“**Power** without love is reckless and abusive, and love without **power** is sentimental and anemic. **Power** at its best is love implementing the demands of **justice**, and **justice** at its best is **power correcting everything** that stands against love.” — Re. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

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